



The Changing of the Crowns

There is something magical about the age of 70. The Good Book talks about the age of 70 (three scores and ten). It marks the end and at the same time the beginning of a cycle in the life of a human being. Children are grown, grandchildren are running around, the labor market is but a memory and life's doors are even more ready for closure.

On 31 January 2008 Her Majesty Queen Beatrix, queen of the Kingdom of the Netherlands turned 70. This is

the age at which members of the judiciary and the council of state retire from active service. The Constitution does not stipulate when a monarch must leave the throne. This is a decision that is left to the monarch and the monarch alone. In a modern constitutional monarchy there will be of course some consultation with the prime minister of the day. As the birthday of Her Majesty was being celebrated some speculation went on as to when queen Beatrix will say it is time to hand over the reins of state to someone else.

What does the Constitution and history teach us on the whole process of the changing of the crowns? The reign of queen Beatrix will end at the moment of abdication. This is the moment that publicly is made known that the queen is stepping down. The queen's grandmother and mother, Wilhelmina and Juliana respectively, abdicated by signing an Instrument of Abdication. However, this is not mandated by the Constitution. Prince Willem-Alexander becomes king at the same point in time his mother resigns. This is to avoid a monarch less term.

According to the rules of succession he is the first in line to succeed his mother given the fact he is the queen's first-born. Under the present Constitution a female firstborn has the same rights as a male.

After ascension to the throne the new king must appear before a joint-session of the Houses of Parliament. Present are also representatives of the parliaments from the other parts of the kingdom. This ceremony takes place in the Nieuwe Kerk (New Church) in the capital city of Amsterdam. Although it takes place in a house of worship the service is of a secular nature. Before Parliament the king is invested and takes the oath of allegiance to the Constitution. Contrary to the British tradition, Dutch monarchs are not crowned. Television images of for example the coronation of queen Elizabeth II by the archbishop of Canterbury are nonexistent in our kingdom.

When Willem-Alexander becomes king William IV he will be first of all the new head of state. This means he will be the highest officer of the kingdom

of the Netherlands that can represent the realm. He also becomes part of the government of the kingdom and the government of the Antilles (if they still exist) and Aruba. When he comes to Aruba he will have to power to sign a bill into law. Executing this function the king is not responsible to parliament. He is also inviolable or as the British say: 'The king can do no wrong'. This means he is immune from criminal prosecution. He also becomes the new chair of the Council of State. This is a ceremonial position. The Council is guided on a daily basis by a vice-chair. Under the Constitution he takes on the role of Head of the Royal Household. His eldest daughter, Amalia, will be first in line to the throne. His two other daughters will follow their sister. Their mother, princess Maxima, will become queen, provided the rules are amended. There is an ongoing debate on the matter. The spouses of the Dutch queens ('royal consorts') never carried the title 'king'. Why should Maxima then be called 'queen'?

At present we can only continue speculating when queen Beatrix will be

ready to be called princess once more. Her grandmother stepped down in 1948 after 50 years of service, her mother reigned for 32 years until 1980. When Beatrix was called to the throne 28 years ago, she had a full understanding of her constitutional mission: to stand above all particular interests. She did not choose a ceremonial role but used all her talents and influence to promote the common good. Where forces have tried and are trying to disrupt social cohesion she has taken a stand. All within the bounds of constitutional monarchy. Don't you think that the year 2012 sounds nice? 

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